

'Sometimes You Have the Opportunity to Save a Life'

An Army veteran and VFW member shares how a hunting trip hosted by a nonprofit from North Carolina saved his life and renewed his sense of purpose

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Bill Gregory stared into a dark abyss in the summer of 2017. Reminded of all the tragedy and death he had seen over the course of his 27-year military career, the 61-year-old former Army Special Forces chief warrant officer 4 considered suicide.

With the fastidious fervor of a screenwriter, Gregory plotted his final act. The Wagram, North Carolina, resident would make it look like an accident, falling asleep behind the wheel of his car and plowing into a bunch of trees in the early hours of the morning on Oct. 25 — his late mother's birthday.

"Everything was mapped out," said Gregory, a member of VFW Post 9314 in Old Forge, New York. "I made sure my will and power of attorney were up to date, as well as my life insurance. I even wrote my own obituary, left a list of people to speak at my funeral and named those I wanted to carry my casket."

A couple of weeks before Oct. 25, 2017, Gregory went into work, where he had been hired as a civilian training specialist with the Department of the Army following his retirement from active-duty.

Gregory sat at his desk, logged into his computer and scrolled through his emails. Unread was one from his battalion chaplain, Chad Cottle, which was sent to all the members of Gregory's former unit at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The email referenced a combination of deer and wild hog hunts being hosted by an organization dubbed Operation Resolute (OR), a ministry-based nonprofit out of Raleigh, North Carolina.

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“I’ve loved the outdoors from day one, growing up hunting and fishing since I was 5 years old,” Gregory said. “I had lost all the enthusiasm for it completely, though, so I saw this email and it piqued my interest.”

Gregory reached out to Cottle, and both men met up and chatted about the upcoming hunt, a two-day escapade for deer and wild hog hunting. What began as small talk, however, grew in size.

Gregory opened up little by little, sharing his battle with the abyss that kept staring at him, welcoming him like it had many veterans before him.

“I’ve seen a lot, whether it was active-duty or as a civilian,” Gregory said. “I have known a number of good acquaintances over the years that have actually committed suicide. The man that had my desk before I retired from active-duty committed suicide in front of his family.”

‘I HAD A LOT LEFT TO LIVE FOR’

In attempting to break this pattern that had taken so many of his acquaintances and fellow veterans, Gregory opened up to Cottle in hopes that it would unburden him.

“It helped me tremendously to get some things off my chest without being chastised by those with whom I worked,” Gregory added. “After two hours with Cottle, I began feeling a bit better inside.”

Gregory also snagged the lifeline provided by Cottle, joining his first hunt with OR a week later.

He found himself driving to the hunting venue in Hyde County, North Carolina, in the coastal lands of North Carolina, alongside an active-duty sergeant first class, as well as two others from his battalion, a chaplain and his assistant.

From establishing common ground to getting personal with one another, the men opened up while on their way to the venue, where they were met by OR’s Executive Director Joel McDaniel, a former minister who started OR in 2013 with his wife, Kimberly.

“We all shared a nice, hot meal of lasagna, and then we were trucked out to our respective deer stands for the afternoon hunt,” Gregory said. “Myself and two others even brought our night hunting gear, since in North Carolina it’s legal to hunt for feral hogs at night on private property.”

While at his deer stand, hunting took a backseat to self-reflection.

Despite seeing a couple of young deer just before darkness descended, Gregory chose not to

shoot them. Instead, he basked in the sights and sounds of the wilderness around him. In unwinding his mind, he began to crawl out of the abyss and into a clear picture.

“I realized I hadn’t fully thought out what my suicide would do to my wife and daughter,” Gregory said. “The word selfish came to mind. And as the hours passed, I came to see that I had a lot left to live for.”

‘SERVING THOSE WHO SACRIFICE’

Leaving the hunting venue in Hyde County a week before his planned suicide attempt, Gregory had developed a renowned sense of purpose. He had measured the situation and saw it as just one of the many tests he had overcome in his lifetime.

But the hunting trip offered more than just his peace of mind; it also unveiled something Gregory had not yet known about himself.

“It just hit me,” Gregory said. “It took me a long time to understand what my purpose in life was, and up until that point, I thought it was serving my country for 40-plus years. That’s neat, but my purpose is to help others in the same situation I was in and maybe along the way introduce them to my lord and savior, Jesus Christ.”

Gregory has since joined OR as a volunteer, helping others’ peace of mind and purpose.

Abiding by the nonprofit’s motto of “Serving Those Who Sacrifice,” Gregory has guided several hunts alongside chaplains from all branches of the military.

From deer to bear hunts, waterfowl hunts and onshore/offshore fishing trips in OR’s 430-acre tract of coastal land in Hyde County, Gregory has witnessed others like him find the sort of decompression and emotional support that is often amiss for veterans.

“And there is no cost for individuals who participate in these events,” Gregory said. “The key is that people have to coordinate their participation directly through their military chaplain. This gets them talking and allows for the chaplain to connect with his folks.”

It’s in those moments of camaraderie where vets open up to each other that OR gets to work its magic. The nonprofit, according to Gregory, fills a much-needed niche within the military community.

“As Joel [McDaniel] says, ‘We’re picking up the bucket of water and moving it from here to there,’ ” Gregory added. “It’s truly an honor and a blessing to be connected with them because sometimes you have the opportunity to save a life.”

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